

Resistance Fighters or Guerillas? Labeling Bias Influences Evaluations of Groups Involved in Iraq War

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(Abstract) Whether a group is labeled as terrorists or freedom fighters depends on whom you ask and when you ask. This paper investigates the power of media labels to influence people's perceptions, attitudes, and emotions towards the groups who were involved in the recent Iraq war. From 2003 through 2011 the Iraqi oppositional forces were labeled everything from terrorists, insurgents, guerillas, militants, Islamic extremists, resistance fighters, to freedom fighters. The Los Angeles Times appreciated the power of these labels; they ordered their reporters to stop labeling the Iraqi oppositional forces as resistance fighters, instructing their reporters to instead label them as insurgents or guerillas. The current study, which was run prior to the U.S. military withdrawal from Iraq in December 2011, investigates the relative power of these labels: resistance fighters vs. guerillas. Results confirmed that the guerilla label produced diverging levels of support for the Iraqi oppositional forces depending on previously held views on the Iraq War, while the resistance fighter label helped to mask these preexisting differences.

Keywords: Intergroup Relations; Prejudice; Media Labels.

1. INTRODUCTION

During the Soviet-Afghan War that was bitterly fought throughout the 1980s, the U.S. media referred to the Afghan mujahedeen as "freedom fighters" or "resistance fighters," which seemed appropriate considering that the Afghans were resisting Soviet occupation [1]. Adding to the perceived appropriateness of these terms was the fact that the United States was supporting the Afghan mujahedeen at that time. In fact, through a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) program called "Operation Cyclone," the U.S. spent billions of dollars during the 1980s on military training and military weapons to support the various mujahedeen factions [1]. One of the leaders of those mujahedeen factions was a young Saudi named Osama bin Laden, whose faction (i.e., Maktab al-Khadamat) eventually morphed into al-Qaeda. Needless to say, the U.S. media eventually stopped referring to Osama bin Laden as a resistance fighter.

Ironically, the U.S. government also labeled Saddam Hussein a resistance fighter and a freedom fighter. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, the CIA funded and trained Saddam Hussein to assist with the removal of Abd al-Karim Qasim, the Iraqi Prime Minister at the time [2]. After a botched assassination attempt on Qasim by Saddam Hussein in 1959, a successful coup was carried out by Hussein and his colleagues in 1963; Qasim was then executed on public

television [2]. The U.S. involvement in that Iraqi regime change did not receive the kind of media attention that their support for Saddam Hussein throughout the Iran-Iraq War received. That latter support took the form of supplying military intelligence, military weapons, and billions of dollars in U.S. guaranteed loans [3]. This broad-based support during the 1980s led President Ronald Reagan to send special envoy Donald Rumsfeld to Baghdad. The meeting between Donald Rumsfeld and Saddam Hussein on December 20, 1983, and their infamous handshake, was broadcast by both Iraqi and U.S. television.

The potential power of the mass media to shape public opinion has long been a source of interest and research [4]-[5]. For example, in his *Propaganda Technique in World War I* [4] American political scientist and communication theorist Harold Lasswell argued that it was essential for the mass media to emphasize the enemy's satanic nature though biased reporting, one-sided statements, and the labels chosen to portray their enemy. Lasswell believed that the media should be used to ensure that the general public conformed to what the "elite citizens" had determined was in all of their best interests. Like Plato, he saw the general public as a bewildered herd in need of guidance. In short, Lasswell, and his contemporary Walter Lippmann, suggested that the media should be used to manufacture consent among the masses.

The media has a long history of revealing bias through their choice of labels, but does employing these labels have any real impact on attitudes or intergroup relations? In short, the answer is yes. Labels ascribed to a group, object, or idea have been shown to alter people's perceptions, judgments, and behaviors [6]-[10]. Of course, group labels have long been a significant part of political discourse as political strategists attempt to manipulate public opinion and attitudes. In a study examining differences in attributions made toward groups, labeling individuals as "welfare recipients" compared to "the poor" lead to more negative evaluations of the individuals and higher judgments of personal responsibility [11]. Although describing overlapping sets of people, these two labels invoke dissimilar reactions based on labeling. Fox News Channel, the U.S.'s most popular cable news channel, recognizes the political power of labels. A directive written by a senior Fox executive during the early days of the Iraq war ordered their reporters to start referring to the U.S. Marine gunmen as "sharp-shooters" instead of "snipers," because Fox felt that the label "sniper" could carry negative connotations [12].

Slight alterations in the labels used by the media and society can engender new attitudes, enhance prejudice, and even alter behavior. Although much work has focused on the labels that a society attach to groups within their country [13], these labeling effects may be intensified when the group in question is a newly formed political or religious outgroup. In the absence of established group labels, while public opinion is forming, the new labels chosen by the media to describe a group may be particularly influential. Such was the case after the invasion of Iraq on March 20, 2003, when U.S. and U.K. troops were met with resistance by Iraqi oppositional forces. This new outgroup (i.e., Iraqi oppositional forces) did not have a defined name, and was labeled everything from "insurgents," "guerillas," "resistance fighters," "rebels," "Islamic extremists," "militants," to "terrorists" by a variety of western media sources. In November of 2003, approximately 9 months after the official start of the Iraq War, Los Angeles Times' assistant managing editor Melissa McCoy banned the use of the term "resistance fighters" to describe the Iraqi's oppositional troops in favor of the terms "insurgents" or "guerillas." The editor was concerned that the resistance fighter label might contain positive connotations and perhaps romanticize the Iraqi oppositional forces [14]. The current study, which was run prior to the U.S. military withdrawal from Iraq in December 2011, was designed to systematically investigate the impact of this switch in labels and to assess the influence that outgroup labels can have on people's perceptions, attitudes, and emotions towards the Iraqi oppositional forces.

It is hypothesized that, as the Los Angeles Times' assistant editor predicted, Iraqi oppositional forces labeled as resistance fighters would receive more favorable evaluations and more support than those labeled as guerillas. The resistance fighter label can draw on sentiments and images from the French and

American Revolutions, and thus be viewed more favorably. The guerilla label lacks such positive connotations. It is also predicted that individual differences in support for the war will moderate these effects. That is, ones' prior belief about the United States' involvement in the Iraq War should influence whether these labels can alter perceptions, attitudes, and emotions. Individuals who do not support the United States' involvement in the Iraq War should have little motivation to disparage the Iraqi oppositional forces, so their support for those forces should be stable regardless of the label applied. In contrast, when one supports the United States' involvement in the Iraq War, sufficient motivation exists to view the enemy in a more negative light and to denigrate that enemy when given the opportunity. As a result, we expect that individuals who supported the United States' involvement in the Iraq War will reveal the most negative attitudes towards the Iraqi oppositional forces when they are labeled as guerillas. The resistance fighter label, however, should attenuate the natural attitude differences between those individuals who supported and were in opposition to the Iraq War.

2. METHODS

2.1 Participants

Sixty-three undergraduate students (15 males, 48 females) at a large public university in the U.S. participated in the experiment in exchange for partial course credit. Twenty-five identified as Asian/Asian American, 25 as White, 9 as Latino, 1 as Black, and 3 chose to identify as "other." All participants were American citizens.

2.2 Materials

Attitudes toward the Iraq War. Participant's attitudes toward the Iraq War were assessed using two items ($\alpha = 0.92$) on a 7-point Likert scale: 1) How much do you support the invasion of Iraq? (1 = Strongly do not support to 7 = Strongly support) and 2) How much do you support the Iraq War? (1 = Strongly do not support to 7 = Strongly support).

Iraqi label condition. An actual Associated Press (AP) article from September 29, 2003 was utilized titled, "U.S. troops battle resistance fighters in town west of Baghdad" [15]. The article describes an attack by, and subsequent arrest of, 92 Iraqi oppositional forces that had confronted U.S. troops in a Sunni Muslim town near Baghdad. Two versions of the AP article were created, employing either the article's original label "resistance fighters" to describe the Iraqi oppositional forces or the label "guerillas"—the preferred term of the Los Angeles Times. Other than the label employed, the two articles were identical. The resistance fighter label (or the guerilla label) appeared in the title and then three times in the body of the article. Sample sentences from the AP article include, "U.S. troops backed by tanks and helicopters battled Iraqi guerillas/resistance fighters Monday near a Sunni Muslim town west of Baghdad," and "Villagers said the clash

began after Iraqi guerilla/resistance fighters fired rocket-propelled grenades at an American convoy.”

It is important to note that during pretesting we ran a third condition (i.e., a neutral condition) in which we referred to the Iraqi oppositional forces as simply the “Iraqi oppositional forces” throughout the entire article; that is, we did not employ the guerillas/resistance fighters manipulation. Pretesting confirmed that there was no difference in the level of support for the Iraqis when they were referred to as “Iraqi oppositional forces” or “guerillas” ($F < 1$), so we decided to drop the neutral condition for the actual experiment. As will be reported below, it appears that the guerilla label accurately captures the natural disparity in attitudes between those who supported the Iraq War and those who did not.

Support for Iraqi oppositional forces. After reading their assigned AP article, participants responded to a questionnaire assessing their beliefs, attitudes, and emotions towards the Iraqi oppositional forces. All the items contained in the questionnaire referred to the Iraqis as the “Iraqi oppositional forces” in order to isolate the effect of the article-label manipulation (i.e., resistance fighters/guerillas). The six items ($\alpha = 0.85$), measured on a 7-point Likert scale, were: 1) How angry do the Iraqi oppositional forces make you? (1= very angry to 7= not angry at all), 2) The Iraqi oppositional forces are justified in their resistance to U.S. occupation (1=strongly disagree to 7= strongly agree), 3) How do you feel about the Iraqi oppositional forces? (1= completely unsympathetic to 7= very sympathetic), 4) The Iraqi oppositional forces’ resistance to U.S. occupation is reasonable, (1=strongly disagree to 7= strongly agree), 5) How sympathetic are you to the Iraqi oppositional forces? (1= completely unsympathetic to 7= completely sympathetic), and 6) The Iraqi oppositional forces are justified in their actions, (1=strongly disagree to 7= strongly agree).

Demographics. Participants completed a demographic questionnaire in which gender, race, age, political orientation, and nationality were indicated. Political orientation was measured using one question: How would you describe your political leanings? (1= far left i.e., very liberal to 7= far Right i.e., very conservative).

2.3 Procedure

Prior to the U.S. military withdrawal from Iraq in December 2011, participants entered the laboratory and were seated at a desk by a research assistant. Each participant received a research packet that contained the AP article (resistance fighters or guerillas), followed by the Iraqi oppositional forces questionnaire. Once completed, participants turned in the research packet to the research assistant, were debriefed, and finally thanked for their participation.

3. RESULTS

To ensure that participants of varying levels of support for the Iraq War were randomly assigned to condition, a post hoc ANOVA was run, showing no main effect for condition based

on prior support for the Iraq War, $F = 0.247$, ns. After dummy coding the label condition (0= guerilla, 1= resistance fighter), centering the support for the Iraq War variable, and creating the interaction term, a stagewise multiple regression was run using the attitudes toward Iraqi oppositional forces variable as the outcome measure [16]. In the first block, race, gender, and political orientation were entered in the regression as covariates in order to isolate the effect of prior support for the Iraq War apart from possible confounds. The main effects for label condition and support for the Iraq War were entered in the second block, followed by their interaction term in the final block. Results confirmed a main effect for label condition, such that participants exposed to the resistance-fighter label revealed more support for the Iraqi oppositional forces than participants exposed to the guerilla label, $B = 0.36$; $b = 0.64$, $SE = 0.18$, $p < 0.001$. Another main effect for preexisting support for the Iraq War was obtained, such that increasing support for the Iraq War was coupled with decreasing support for the Iraq oppositional forces, $B = -0.58$; $b = -0.34$, $SE = 0.09$, $p < 0.001$.

Further, there was a significant interaction between prior war support and label type on level of support for the Iraqi opposition forces, $B = 0.39$; $b = 0.32$, $SE = 0.12$, $p < 0.01$. Figure 1 plots the interaction with preexisting support for the Iraq War shown at ± 1 standard deviation from the mean. Simple slope analyses [16] revealed that labeling condition did not affect support for the Iraqi oppositional forces for individuals who do not support the Iraq War (-1 SD), $t < 1$, ns. For individuals who do support the war ($+1$ SD), however, simple slope analyses indicated a significant change in support between labeling conditions ($b = 1.16$, $t(55) = 5.01$, $p < 0.001$), such that indicated support for the Iraqi oppositional forces increased in the “resistance fighter” condition compared to the “guerilla” condition. Overall, the results confirmed the hypothesis that the guerilla term would have a polarizing effect on support for the Iraqi oppositional forces. Iraq War supporters denigrated the political outgroup when the guerilla label was used, while the resistance fighter label counteracted this natural disparity—enhancing the support for the Iraqi oppositional forces among those individuals who supported U.S. involvement in the Iraq War.

4. DISCUSSION

The current experiment illustrates the power of the media to influence public opinion simply by the choice of label applied to a new outgroup. As the Los Angeles Times’ assistant editor predicted, attitudes toward the Iraqi oppositional forces were more favorable under the resistance-fighter label compared to the guerilla label. Further, the positive nature of the resistance fighter label was strong enough to overcome the negative evaluations of the Iraqi oppositional forces by those who supported the Iraq War. As our pretesting confirmed, the guerilla label seemed to reflect the natural perceptions, attitudes, and emotions that people held towards the Iraqi oppositional forces; whereas the resistance fighter

label seemed to mask this difference.

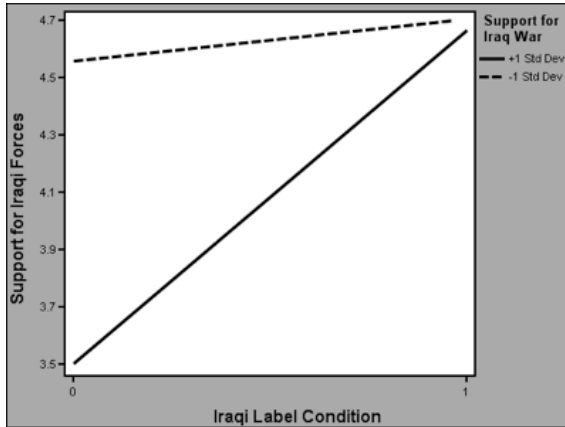


Figure 1. Graph of the interaction between Iraqi label condition (1= “resistance fighter”, 0 = “guerilla”) and level of support for Iraq War (shown +/- 1 SD above the mean). Graph reflects unstandardized b coefficients

The resistance fighter label may have been able to alter perceptions, attitudes, and emotions by eliciting more positive symbolic beliefs about the group by drawing on celebrated images from the French and American Revolutions. Further, the attributions associated with the labels, also called “attributional signatures” [11, 17], may impart meaning about the controllability or cause of outgroup actions. The resistance-fighter label may lead participants to view the Iraqis’ aggressive actions as more justifiable in the sense that they were fighting for a higher moral cause—their freedom. Since “resistance” is in the label, it leads readers to remember that the U.S. and U.K. forces invaded Iraq, and therefore see Iraqi actions as a response to this initial event. The guerilla label is devoid of any heroic or romantic sentiments, with stronger connotations of unprovoked aggression; thus, the guerilla label makes the aggressive act seem more proactive, as if the Iraqi forces sought out the conflict and attacked the U.S. and U.K. troops.

The current experiment helps to extend knowledge of the impact of outgroup labels on intergroup attitudes, and by examining a real-world situation, the applicability of these results are enhanced. Further research could explore the stability and durability of these intergroup attitudes affected by label choices and track changes of public opinion using large scale surveys. Content analyses of political speeches or media reports could also be connected with perceptions, attitudes, and emotions directed at outgroups. One can also hypothesize other ways the media may influence intergroup attitudes using apparently innocuous alterations in language. To illustrate, the abstraction level and choice of verb used to describe an outgroup member’s action can transmit prejudice, even serving as a measure of implicit racial prejudice [18]-[20]. Media outlets, while not intending to explicitly use prejudicial language, may still impart implicit prejudice through such processes [21]-[22].

Anytime a newly formed political ethnic outgroup appears

on the international scene, the media’s ability to shape public opinion is especially critical to examine. By better understanding the impact that labeling and language choice has on our perceptions, judgments, and behaviors, society can more clearly evaluate the appropriateness and power of the media’s actions.

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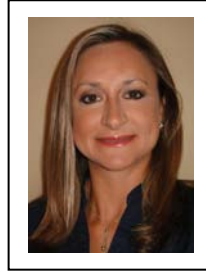
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Author Introduction



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Dr. Kimberly Barsamian Kahn: Dr. Kahn is an Assistant Professor of Social Psychology at Portland State University. She received her Ph.D. in Social Psychology from the University of California, Los Angeles. After completing her PhD, Dr. Kahn was a Postdoctoral Scholar at the Center for Social Research and Intervention at Lisbon University Institute in Lisbon, Portugal. Dr.

Kahn's research addresses contemporary forms of racial bias that are hidden, subtle, ignored, or unacknowledged within society. Using a social psychological approach with diverse samples, Dr. Kahn is interested in how these subtle biases impact the activation and application of stereotypes across domains and contexts.



Shirley Hutchinson, M.A. Student: Shirley received her Honours degree in Psychology, and Certificate in Forensic Psychology, from the University of British Columbia in 2011. She has returned to UBC to pursue graduate work under the supervision of Dr. Paul G. Davies. Shirley has completed several directed studies, and research projects related to the area of stereotypes, prejudice, and

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